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SOUTH-SOUTH SOLIDARITY AND EAST TIMOR: THE APCET EXPERIENCE

By Gus Miclat

The Asia-Pacific Coalition for East Timor, or APCET, epitomizes the reality and relevance of south-south solidarity. The coalition was born after the first and controversial Asia-Pacific Conference on East Timor in Manila in 1994. Since then, the coalition has been in the forefront of solidarity efforts in the Asia-Pacific region in support of the East Timorese quest for self-determination. The violent dispersal of the second APCET conference in Kuala Lumpur late last year has all the more expanded and consolidated the coalition and propelled it to further prestige.

The Global Context

APCET came into being at a time when superpower tensions had considerably eased with the end of the Cold War. In the post-Cold War era, blatant colonialism and big power hegemonism have been rendered obsolete as viable strategies in the conduct of affairs of states.

Today there is an emerging global consensus to push sustainable development - or development that takes care of the needs of the present without jeopardizing those of future generations. States, multi-state formations and people's movements have found common cause in dealing with the twin problems of poverty and the environment.

At the same time, Third World national liberation movements have entered a new phase in their struggles.

Some of the world's long-standing revolutions ended with mixed results. The African National Congress victoriously dismantled apartheid in South Africa after many years of struggle and won state power. Very recently, a nine-month old rebellion toppled one of the longest dictatorships in the world in the former Zaire. The Palestine Liberation Organization, although still in the midst of on-and-off negotiations with its mortal Zionist enemies, are now considered equal partners in the volatile Middle East peace process.

Over in Latin America, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front in El Salvador entered political negotiations and later competed for political office through the electoral arena - with less than salutary results. The once victorious Sandinista movement in Nicaragua which dismantled the Somoza dynasty has since been defeated twice in the ballot box by comebacking conservatives.

A few others plod on with classical armed struggle strategies, as in Peru's Shining Path and the Philippines' New People's Army. Peru's other armed front, the Tupac Amaru, has been

virtually obliterated after a treacherous assault by Fujimori's armed forces. This after the romantic revolutionaries hogged the limelight for quite a while during its capture of the Japanese embassy in Lima. In Sri Lanka, ethnic Tamils are still waging their separatist war against the majority Sinhalese government. And in nearby Burma, the democracy movement is slowly, but surely, gaining ground amidst the brutality and intransigence of the ruling generals in Rangoon.

Multi-state systems, meanwhile, have proved ineffective in solving pressing global concerns. Bickerings have hounded international fora such as UNCED (Earth Summit) at Rio de Janiero, the UN Population Conference in Cairo and the Global Conference on Habitat in Istanbul.

A tri-polar world is slowly emerging from the ashes of the Cold War with the centers based in the United States, Japan and Europe. Even then, the former Easter European bloc, China and the Newly Industrialized Countries are staking their own claims in the global economy. There are some interfaces among these three centers as gleaned from recent developments such as the expansion of NATO into some former Easter European bloc nations, the aggressive marketing and consolidation of APEC, the seeming assertion of independence of ASEAN and the evolution of the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) process.

Technology has shrunk the global village even more as access to information becomes much easier with the mere touch of a button.

Parallel to this, a global civil society based on people's basic aspirations and concerns is evolving. This process—extending beyond national boundaries—is sparking growth and development in entire communities through the efforts of people's organizations and non-governmental organizations acting as agents of change. It portends to be the wave of the future.

If globalization is here to stay, global solidarity -- specifically south-south solidarity has arrived to challenge it.

South-South Internationalism

The end of the Cold War has once again brought to the fore the North-South contradiction and with it, the need for South-South solidarity and cooperation. It is the proverbial clash between the haves and have-nots, the strong and the weak, that has for centuries shaped the destinies of peoples and re-drawn the boundaries of nations.

South-South people's solidarity is the global vision of all those strongly rooted in their respective social movements, yet seeking to come together to evolve a concerted and complementary effort for their common liberation.

But the record of official South-South cooperation has so far been dismal, with the South countries often more interested in fighting each other for the largesse of the North.

Ironic, but not surprising, is the spectacle of some stronger South nations running roughshod over weaker ones in their own efforts to contain the onslaughts of the North. The official reaction to APCET only confirmed that the issue of human rights can never be left solely in the hands of governments.

The irony is that some states, including Indonesia and Malaysia, have taken laudable steps to prevent the North from recolonizing the South under new forms of domination. But the mass extermination of people or the sacrifice of even one human life at the altar of greed deserve the strongest condemnation from all civilized peoples of the world. More so if over 200,000 East Timorese lie buried beneath the earth crying out for justice and vindication.

The East Timor struggle, therefore, presented a concrete opportunity to put South-South people's solidarity to a test.

For East Timor was an Asian, or more specifically, a Southeast Asian concern. More so for Filipinos, who share things in common with the East Timorese. Both are predominantly Catholic. Both take pride in a long libertarian tradition.

Since Indonesia forcibly and brutally annexed East Timor in 1975, the Timorese struggle has generated some support from peoples all over the world specially in the West. In the 90's, however, the struggle of the Maubere had virtually reached an impasse. Most of the world—as shown by consistent United Nations resolutions—continued to support their legitimate cause. But the East Timor resistance had yet to galvanize solidarity where it belongs—Asia. This is where it mattered most.

APCET wanted to bring the East Timor issue to the attention of freedom-loving peoples everywhere, right into the mainstream of world public opinion. And specially so within Southeast Asia—among South nations.

For even if APCET 1 and 2 have come and gone, certainly its impact has not been fleeting, nor its lessons so easily forgotten.

In APCET's aftermath, the foreign policies of the ASEAN governments has been thrown under a grave shadow of doubt, the Ramos and Mahathir governments' claims to democracy unmasked for what they are, and ASEAN realpolitik -characterized by Big Brother Indonesia's virtual domination of the regional grouping -revealed for all the world to see. The ASEAN policy of non-interference in each other's internal affairs specially on the question of human rights is actually a euphemism for mutual tolerance of each other's undemocratic practices.

This has been reaffirmed a countless times and more recently ASEAN has gone a little more recalcitrant when it accepted under its wings another bully in the region—Burma -- to complete its roster of "mafiosis". ASEAN's constructive engagement policy is the ultimate fallacy. But that is another sad story.

The handling of the APCET 1 and 2 by the region's governments showed vividly that the reality does not necessarily jibe with the rhetoric. Gen. Suharto has adamantly

refused to recognize gross human rights violations in East Timor and have showed nothing but sheer contempt for his ASEAN neighbors despite a carefully cultivated veneer of democratic rule. He even touted the recent Indonesian elections as a "festival of democracy". It was neither festive nor democratic as this turned out to be both an orgy of violence and travesty.

For his part, during the maiden APCET 1 in Manila, President Fidel Ramos—himself an ex-general like his Indonesian counterpart and idol—tried vainly to suppress the constitutional guarantees of free speech and free expression in an effort to scuttle APCET 1 to appease the country's neighboring bully. He reprised his curtsey to Suharto when he refused to allow Nobel Peace Laureate Jose Ramos Horta to Manila last November during the APEC summit.

But Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad did not bother with the niceties of democracy and stamped his own brand of terror in nipping the recent APCET 2 in Kuala Lumpur. Unleashing his goons to terrorize the privately-held APCET 2 within the civilized confines of a private hotel, Mahathir deported all foreign delegates to the conference and hauled off the Malaysian organizers to jail.

ASEAN has virtually become silent conspirators to hide Indonesia's dirty, bloody secret in East Timor. It is slowly becoming the *"Association of Suharto's Exclusively Aligned Nations"*.

The constant affirmations of the ASEAN of Indonesia's position on East Timor should be seen in the context of the victories, impact and the toll the campaign for East Timor's self-determination has taken on Suharto and his ilk. Their assertion of a dictator's position is actually a declaration of their own weakness. And of their inevitably untenable position.

East Timor will henceforth no longer be confined to the halls of the United Nations nor whispered about in the corridors of power. Overnight it has become a popular issue: where before perhaps only grim and determined political activists and grizzled diplomats may have heard of this tiny, but oil-rich island, now even Malaysian, Thai and Filipino taxi drivers and cigarette vendors know about East Timor. At the height of the controversy over APCET 1 and 2, East Timor was prime stuff on Philippine, Malaysian, and the region's media —as news and as subject of biting satire.

It is in the ASEAN , where the last and perhaps the bloodiest battlefield for East Timor's legitimate recognition will be. What with the conspiracy of the ASEAN mafia: Mahathir's violent breaking-up of APCET 2, Ramos' denial of visa to Ramos-Horta, even Thailand's and Singapore's blacklisting of East Timor activists - all these point to a trench-digging attitude by the region's dictators and their hirelings. Perish the idea that ASEAN governments will allow any investigation of each other's human rights problems as long as this cabal of leaders remain in power.

But the truth that is East Timor will never again be swept under the rug even under the pretext of ASEAN fraternity. For from APCET also emerged a victorious, broad, Asian-

based people's solidarity movement for East Timorese resistance and human rights in general.

Advocacy for East Timor has also forged a fresh basis for unity among progressive groups in the region. APCET has once again highlighted the Asian and Pacific peoples' unflinching commitment to human rights and civil liberties.

More to the point, APCET has brought into the mainstream the relevance of people-to-people solidarity particularly among the nations in the South. It has also lent credence to the growing importance of people's diplomacy. Diplomacy that is both mass-oriented and empowering.

APCET clearly showed that the interests of Southern peoples are always interrelated and complementary, as in the case of the East Timorese right to self-determination vis-a-vis the Filipinos' or Malaysians' right to zealously defend their own human rights.

APCET was also a first experience of its kind and scale in South-South solidarity. Never before have we been witness to a campaign cum solidarity effort initiated and sustained by South peoples for another South people. Where before we usually encounter solidarity as an effort of good Samaritans or bleeding hearts only from the North, APCET has proven that unity among the oppressed in the world is the progenitor of genuine peoples' internationalism.

APCET is a watershed in peoples' solidarity.

Yet APCET is not alone. There are other, older solidarity groups all over the world not just confined to the issue of East Timor. In fact, the East Timorese struggle has long been the struggle also of hundreds, if not, thousands of activists and supporters in Europe, particularly in Portugal, North America, Japan and even in Africa. Their own valiant and selfless efforts have actually sown the seeds of APCET.

There are potential affiliates about to join APCET in Hongkong, Singapore, Nepal, Korea, Fiji. We even have some contacts in Burma, Papua New Guinea, Assam and Brunei.

Other movements such as the Burmese solidarity effort is likewise gaining ground. The impending twilight of the Suharto era bodes well for the Indonesian democracy movement and its international supporters. There is a growing trend and consensus in global civil society to link up and enhance each other's struggle.

APCET sees the need for a more coordinated and creative effort among these various groups.

Not only is there need for a more balanced approach, but likewise a need to explore untraditional methods of our solidarity work. We should continue but need not limit ourselves to launching campaigns, organizing conferences, meetings, speaking tours and conduct media and lobbying work. We may also need to do tedious research, prepare for a post-independent East Timor, organize internships, management and apprenticeship

programmes and develop the cultural front of our efforts. Perhaps we should support and encourage more East Timorese and South artists and their works and integrate their efforts in our usual approaches.

For two decades and more than 200,000 deaths later, the anguish of the Maubere people and the virtual demise of East Timor are deeply etched in the consciousness of Asia and the rest of the world.

APCET marks a new beginning for the East Timor resistance. It is a vindication as well of the Maubere people's legitimate right to win their freedom and determine their own future.

The Author

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